arglebargle!

sunday, january 13, 2008

R. I. P. Vampira (1921-2008)

Thursday was my forty-sixth birthday. It would also be officially recorded as the day that Maila Nurmi, who became synonymous with her character, **Vampira**, passed away in her sleep at the age of 86.

She was born Maila Elizabeth Syrjäniemi on December 21, 1921, in Petsamo, Finland - now Pechenga, Russia. Her uncle was an Olympic champion in track running, Paavo Nurmi. Maila's family moved to the United States when Maila was only two years old. The young beauty was already dreaming of being a Hollywood star and at the tender age of 17, she took a trip to Los Angeles to seek her

about me

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the new adventures of huckleberry finn-intro(full ...
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fortune. Of course, glory doesn't come easily and Maila became an exotic dancer and photo model to survive.

At some point in 1954, Maila disguised herself as Morticia Addams (Charles Addams ghoulish character from New Yorker Magazine who would eventually become popular on TV and films) for a masked ball. As simply as that, Vampira was born. Maila's appearance appealed to Hunt Stromberg Jr., program director for KABC Channel 7, who was looking for somebody to spice up his night time programming. In a very short time, Maila officially became Vampira to host a show presenting horror movies each Saturday night at 11 PM.In the 1950s she created the character of Vampira, popular for both films and as a television host. Her character was to set the standard for an entire legion of horror hostesses, actresses, and even cartoon characters to follow. From what I have heard she was always kind and gracious with her fans (though some of her co-stars are of a different opinion).

Without a doubt, her striking features, deadpan humor and faux-blasé attitude contributed to make her a fast popular success. Introduced with a music cue (heard twice in *The Shining)*, Vampira came down a fog enshrouded hallway at the start of each show, screaming unexpectedly into the camera and saying: "Screaming relaxes me so." Before commercial breaks, she took the habit of reciting weird poetry or even give out Charles Addams-esque cocktail recipes. She lit and smoked her long cigarettes with her three-inch nails on camera too, which of course would be a huge no-no today.

2009 is Bustin' Loose All Over!
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Black & White in COLOR #5 : The CREATURE!

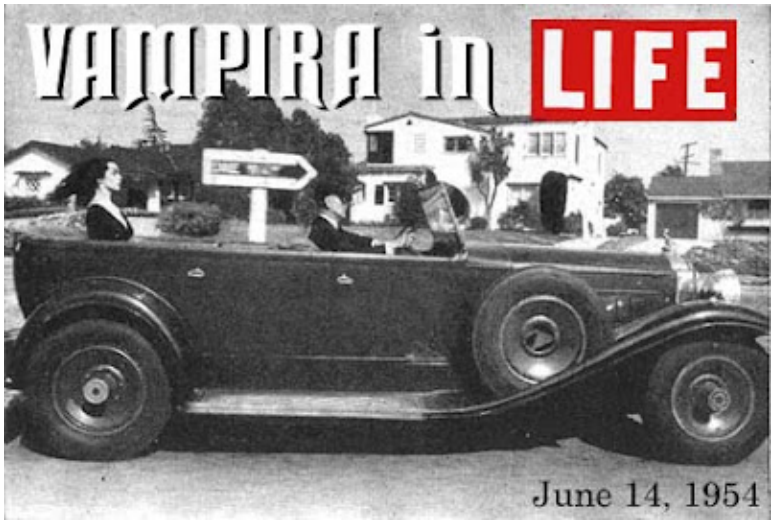
archives

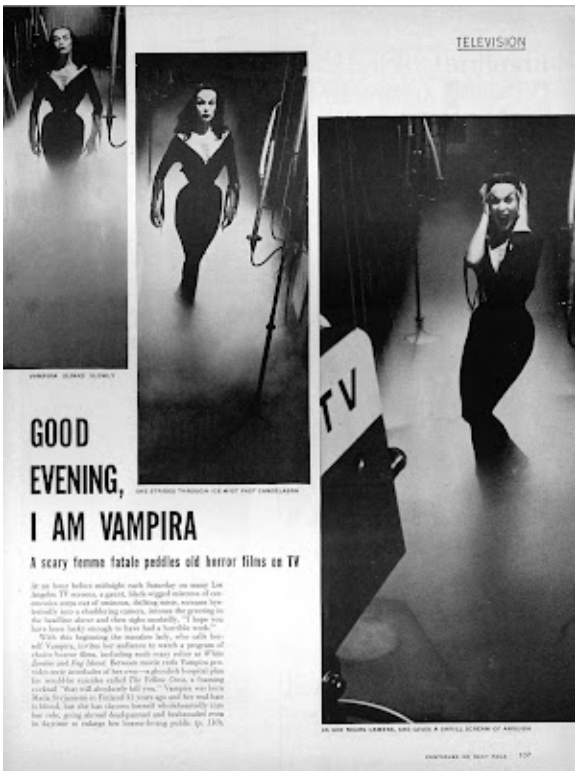
April 2006
May 2006
June 2006
July 2006
August 2006
September 2006
October 2006
November 2006
December 2006
January 2007
February 2007
April 2007
June 2007
July 2007
August 2007
October 2007
November 2007
December 2007
January 2008
February 2008
June 2008
July 2008
August 2008
September 2008
November 2008
December 2008
January 2009
February 2009
March 2009
April 2009
June 2009
January 2010

I Power Blogger

Her unusual figure was no doubt a large part of her success, as Vampira claimed to be gifted with the following measurements: 38-17-36! (Yoiks!)

It didn't take long before publications like *Time* or *Newsweek* gave her some written space.
One of the first first magazines to take notice was *Life*. Here from their June 14th 1954 issue is that original article in it's entirety:





Fame came fast and furiously, and before long Marlon Brando, Mae West and even James Dean became fans -- Dean even debuting an intimate relationship with Maila. (Orson

Welles and she spent some "quality time" together as well.) Oddly, all this attention would be cut short. Dean's premature and tragic death would seriously shake up Maila, not counting ABC trying to stop her in her attempts to pursue different career projects, as their intent was to completely own rights to the Vampira character. Consequently --and somewhat incredibly-- the show would soon be canceled after only one season. It ran less than one year, from April 30 1954 to April 2 1955 but in those 11 months she left an indelible mark on Television and Horror history. Not long after cancellation, Maila was attacked in a beauty parlor by an enraged woman who burned her hair and scalp, causing her to have to totally shave her head . Other unfortunate burns would follow, as Maila later tried to save her cat from a home fire.

Vampira ressurrected with the help of Edward D. Wood Jr., who was shooting his ultimate classic, **Plan 9 from Outer Space**. Maila was hired to work a single day on the movie (for a paltry $200 bucks!), playing a ghoul who came back to life via an alien light-ray. Her undead ally was the immortal Tor Johnson, who has become quite the Horror icon in his own right --inspiring a Don Post mask from this epic that even showed up in other films (like *Mad Max*). It would also make the final screen appearance of Bela Lugosi. Sadly, Bela would not live long enough to work with Vampira onscreen... (But we have this photograph, at least!)

However, after she read the script, she found the story so appallingly bad that she agreed to do it only if she didn't have to speak a word of dialog. She didn't (But since she's supposed to be a ghoul... few notice). She starred in a few other forgotten "classics", but none of them have achieved the popularity of Ed Wood's high-camp firebrand, - hilarious and cherished today.

For a time the spotlight eluded her and Maila owned an antique shop called "Vampira's Attic", and created her own lines of clothing and jewelery.

Interest in camp entertainment in the 1970s would see Ed Wood's films in a new light. The book "The Golden Turkey awards" by the Medved Brothers voted *Plan Nine From Outer Space* "The worst movie of all time". It wasn't long before sellout midnight showings of Plan-Nine (as depicted on *Seinfeld*) became hip entertainment. All this attention would make Vampira once again popular for a new generation of fans. Musical groups like The Damned and The Misfits wrote about her in songs. As Vampira, Maila even turned up as a singer for a punk band.
Sometime in 1981, a television station contacted Maila for a renewal of the Vampira concept. According to her, many discussions took place over the next few months and she remains convinced that all her ideas were stolen for the Elvira character. She sued for tens of millions.

A Finnish documentary about Maila was shot in 1995, entitled **Death, Sex and Taxes**. In 1998, she returned to movies for **I Woke Up Early the Day I Died**, from an old Ed Wood script and starring Billy Zane. Until just recently she was still active on the star-convention circuit.

While it was thought for years no footage of the old Vampira Show was known to exist, at the end of the late 1990s a friend of mine "in the industry" told me about 5 minutes of footage had been found in the KABC archives and was going to be used in a news story about the aging Vampiress. He'd managed to snag a nice copy of the unedited footage tape (on vhs), and graciously shared it with me. Needless to state I felt very privileged. So much so that I "sat on the evidence" for years. I did somewhat enjoy insisting from time-to-time that the footage **did** exist in the faces of hard-line fans who were ready to put their careers on the line that it didn't, and then-- BAM --producing the hard evidence. (Ahhh...I might as well also note that while I read on a Horror Host site earlier today that the "only existing footage" came from Dave Stevens, my wife reminds me that we gave him a copy from our tape --so he could show it to Maila herself-- in summer 2000.)

That's not the ONLY Vampira footage out there either, I'm happy to report. A few years ago the History Channel (I think) did a multi-part series on the History of Las Vegas. Somewhere around part 3 the focus shifts to Liberace, and sure enough, Vampira can be seen briefly (about 10 seconds worth) on stage dancing with her old Pal.

I'm assuming this footage is probably all available on the "*Vampira: The Movie*" DVD
(I still haven't seen it) ...if not it should be.

It's intriguing to guess what kind of cultural impact she could have had if her career had been longer and more profitable. As an immortal cult figure, who knows what kind of importance she could've had if she'd truly been given the chance to become the mistress of her own destiny?

Movie credits

1947 *If Winter Comes*

1958 *Too Much, Too Soon*

1959 *Plan 9 from Outer Space, The Beat Generation, The Big Operator*

1960 *I Passed for White, Sex Kittens Go to College*

1962 *The Magic Sword*

1986 *Population One*

1998 *I Woke Up Early the Day I Died*

The Vampira Show - KABC-TV 1954-55

Featuring Maila Nurmi as "Vampira"

Channel 7, Los Angeles, California

1.	04/30/1954	Dig Me Later Vampira (Preview Show)
		Saturday Night/Sunday Morning at Midnight
2.	05/01/1954	*Charge is Murder*
3.	05/08/1954	*The Face of Marble*
4.	05/15/1954	*Revenge of the Zombies*
5.	05/22/1954	*Fog Island*
		Saturday Night at 11:00 p.m.
6.	05/29/1954	*Corridor of Mirrors*
7.	06/05/1954	(Not Listed)*
8.	06/12/1954	*Devil Bat's Daughter*
9.	06/19/1954	*The Flying Serpent*
10.	06/26/1954	*The Mask of Dijon*
11.	07/03/1954	*Strange Mr. Gregory*
12.	07/10/1954	*The Man With Two Lives*
13.	07/17/1954	*Corridor of Mirrors*
14.	07/24/1954	*Fear*
15.	07/31/1954	*Rogue's Tavern*
16.	08/07/1954	*Dangerous Intruder*
17.	08/14/1954	*Mystery of the 13th Guest*
18.	08/21/1954	*Midnight Limited*
19.	08/28/1954	*Bluebeard*
20.	09/04/1954	*Missing Lady*
21.	09/11/1954	*Murder By Invitation*
22.	09/18/1954	*Red Dragon*
23.	09/25/1954	*Missing Heiress*
24.	10/02/1954	*Missing Corpse*

25.	10/09/1954	*Fatal Hour*
26.	10/16/1954	*Phantom Killer*
27.	10/23/1954	*The Shadow Returns*
28.	10/30/1954	*King of the Zombies*
29.	11/06/1954	*Doomed to Die*
30.	11/13/1954	*House of Mystery*
31.	11/20/1954	*My Brother's Keeper*
32.	11/27/1954	*Dear Murderer*
33.	12/04/1954	*Castles of Doom*
34.	12/11/1954	*The Charge is Murder*
35.	12/18/1954	*Return of the Ape*
36.	12/25/1954	*Man With the Gray Glove*
37.	01/01/1955	*Apology for Murder*
38.	01/08/1955	*Decoy*
39.	01/15/1955	*Murder is My Business*
40.	01/22/1955	*Phantom of 42nd Street*
41.	01/29/1955	*Case of the Guardian Angel*
42.	02/05/1955	*Lady Chaser*
43.	02/12/1955	*Killer at Large*
44.	02/19/1955	*She Shall Have Murder*
45.	02/26/1955	*The Lady Confesses*
		Saturday Night at 10:30 p.m.
46.	03/05/1955	*Larceny in Her Heart*
47.	03/12/1955	*Glass Alibi*
48.	03/19/1955	*Detour*
49.	03/26/1955	*Strangler of the Swamp*
50.	04/02/1955	*Woman Who Came Back*

*The major L.A. newspapers (*The Los Angeles Times*, *The Los Angeles Examiner* and *The Los Angeles Daily News*) list only "Vampira" for this date, as does the L.A. edition of *TV Guide*. The name of the film shown is not listed. However, the article in the 14 June 1954 issue of *Life* mentions two films shown on the program: *White Zombie* and *Fog Island*. The latter had been shown and listed prior to the article's publication, so it is likely that *White Zombie* was shown on this date.

Ironically, when I first googled Vampira's name, this tombstone from Plan Nine came up first.
Rest in peace, Maila. You were the first true Horror-babe. The first cool-ghoul. The first Living-dead girl.

Big thanks and a tip of the cobwebbed hat go out to the Cult Sirens site, The explodingkinetoscope site, The Milwalkee Horror Hosts site and Dick (Nitelinger) Golembiewski (for his exhaustive research on the episode lists) and the 800 pound Gorilla.
Labels: Ed Wood, Life Magazine, Plan Nine from Outer Space, Tor Johnson, Vampira

posted by c. martin croker at 1:08 pm | 6 comments